

Puget Sound Partnership

our sound, our community, our chance

Action Agenda Update Initial Strategic Priorities for Puget Sound

Proposed Action: Science Panel Discussion – This document was provided to the Leadership Council at its June 12 & 13 Meeting and does not yet reflect that discussion. Martha Neuman will provide a verbal overview of Leadership Council direction concerning this document at the June 19 Science Panel meeting.

Introduction

The Action Agenda will answer four questions: 1) What is the current status of Puget Sound and what are the biggest threats to it?; 2) What is a healthy Puget Sound?; 3) What actions must be taken that will move us to a healthy Puget Sound?; and 4) Where should we start?

To answer these questions we have engaged regional scientists, policy experts, and concerned citizens throughout the region in an intense series of specific issue workshops. We first inventoried what Puget Sound activities are happening now around the region. We received over 300 such inventories and we have synthesized them. Next we conducted Action Area meetings to get a sense of the key issues in each of our seven Action Areas. Then, we convened experts from around the region to develop “topic forum papers” to stimulate discussion about each of the key goals in our enabling legislation. We received over 1,200 pages of comment from 229 commenters on the topic forum papers. Finally, we hosted workshops to discuss each topic forum. Over 500 people participated in the five workshops. In total over 1100 people have participated in our 19 workshops. We are deeply heartened by the immense amount of input that we have received from the public.

Over the past month we have synthesized the immense amount of input and ideas we have received. Overall, the following priorities flow from the analytical process we have engaged in and are the most significant issues facing the Sound. These strategies are inter-related, must be implemented together, and cannot stand alone as a way to restore ecosystem health. We recognize that they do not cover every major problem in Puget Sound, but we have learned from our predecessor agencies we must prioritize.

Last week we vetted these priorities with the Ecosystem Coordination Board and received both positive reactions and helpful insights. Many of their suggestions are included here.

The Four Initial, Strategic Priorities

Priority A: We must develop a process within the Action Agenda to ensure that activities and funding are focused on the most urgent and important problems facing the Sound.

Finding:

Our current tools were not designed to sustain the Puget Sound ecosystem as a whole. In the early decades of environmental protection, agencies and programs were created to address specific threats as they were identified. These efforts have had positive results and accomplished a great deal to clean up the air, water, and soil. However, they frequently operate as distinct programs with separate goals, staffs, budgets, and regulatory constraints. These separate programs fail to address the cumulative and intertwined impacts of habitat loss, stormwater runoff, toxic contaminants, and water withdrawals that are negatively impacting Puget Sound.

Our existing fragmented and uncoordinated approach cannot keep up with the problems and conditions we face now, let alone the changes that are coming with significantly more people and climate shifts. We need a single unified game plan for the region that can define what must happen to restore and protect Puget Sound. Then we must direct effort and money to the most critical issues. That is what the Action Agenda will become.

Examples of what will be needed:

Realignment of the existing system is critical. Many participants have commented that we need to use and improve the regulatory and incentive tools we already have, and beef up monitoring, compliance, and enforcement. We also need to utilize existing plans that are well vetted scientifically. For example, implementation of the salmon recovery plans is likely to have enormous benefits to Puget Sound beyond just salmon recovery. These plans need to be broadened to address how they impact other species in the ecosystem.

We will also need some new tools, particularly creative incentives for landowners and agencies. We will need to do integrated planning across issues and jurisdictions. The current system of mitigation needs reform as it lacks follow-through and is not effective in maintaining ecosystem function. Reforming the current approach can be both cost effective and have improved ecological benefit. Local actions and Sound-wide priorities will need to be aligned. Working to solve problems on a watershed scale will likely be a sensible and manageable way to tackle the inter-related nature of problems and create tailored solutions.

In order to direct funding to the right programs and places in Puget Sound, federal, state, and local funding must be tied to the specific goals defined in the Action Agenda. Education and outreach will require coordination so that consistent messages linked to ecosystem goals are communicated early and often. Consistent funding and learning from our efforts will be critical.

Priority B: Protect the intact ecosystem processes that sustain Puget Sound.

Findings:

Protection of existing functional upland and marine ecosystem processes is critical for maintaining wildlife habitat, flows of fresh water, groundwater infiltration, controlling the volume and composition of stormwater runoff, and many other ecosystem functions. Every topic forum discussed the need to protect ecosystem processes. Protection of high quality ecological areas is less expensive and more effective than trying to repair or recreate damaged areas.

Examples of what will be needed:

The input we received from participants and commenters, particularly through the topic forums, overwhelmingly focused on the need for more consistent implementation and smarter policies related to land use, habitat protection, and growth, and to ramp up our efforts. We need to redefine how and where we grow so that the ecosystem functions instead of degrades. Critical to our ability to protect resources will be encouraging density in urban areas, protecting rural working lands, and avoiding sprawl.

Priority C: Implement restoration projects that will reestablish ecological processes.

Findings:

The experts we convened stated that protecting the habitats and functions that we have left, while essential, will not be enough to sustain the health of the ecosystem. We also need to restore key areas to health. Restoration strategies have often focused on “low hanging fruit”. These projects were ready to go, relatively easy to fund, construct, and report on. While these projects often have benefited the Sound they have not necessarily been the most important projects for Puget Sound. In addition, they have clearly not led to a restored ecosystem.

Examples of what will be needed:

Rebuilding Puget Sound means undertaking restoration at a much larger scale, taking into account sequence, habitat-forming processes, and reconnection of isolated patches of habitat. We need to focus on restoring or recreating the building blocks of the ecosystem processes, structures, and functions that will sustain Puget Sound over time. As with protection, our current efforts need to be both focused and accelerated. Large scale, system restoration must be undertaken immediately in some of the most imperiled and important areas in Puget Sound. For example the oxygen depletion in the waters of Hood Canal and South Sound and the estuary degradation at the mouths of many Puget Sound rivers are having a fundamental negative influence on the function of the ecosystem, and significant improvement is needed now.

Priority D: Reduce water pollution at its source.

Findings:

Water pollution threatens our health (most directly from eating contaminated seafood), impacts many of the species that make up the web of life in Puget Sound, and diminishes our quality of life. Increasing numbers of people, cars, and pavement mean more pollutants entering the waterways in higher concentrations at a faster rate. Pollution continues to pour into Puget Sound even as we clean up pollutants of the past. PCBs, DDT, and other persistent toxic substances known as “legacy” toxics, are slowly being cleaned up through Superfund and other efforts. But as even as we spend millions cleaning this up, we allow more pollutants to enter the Sound.

Stormwater runoff is a known major contributor of pollution. Most existing stormwater systems are inadequate, and stormwater practices in some parts of Puget Sound are outdated. New pollutants such as synthetic hormones enter the water, many of which we know very little about or have few standards and testing methods to evaluate. Poorly functioning septic tanks all along Puget Sound allow viruses and bacteria to enter waters where we harvest shellfish. At a system wide level we must reduce this ongoing pollution if we are to recover the Sound.

Examples of what will be needed:

We need to keep toxic, nutrient, and pathogen pollutants out of our water, fish and shellfish (and by extension, ourselves) in the first place. This does not mean that we should abandon important efforts to clean up polluted waters and sediments, but we will need to reduce the loadings of pollutants that enter Puget Sound. Improved stormwater practices should be implemented that will address both the volume of polluted water and the pollutants themselves. Most of the stormwater runoff to Puget Sound comes from areas developed before the mid-1990s, and in these areas, retrofitting will be necessary. To avoid repeating the same mistakes, urbanizing areas will need to utilize low impact development and other improved techniques tailored to the site. Throughout Puget Sound, nutrients and pathogens are reaching our waters and should be reduced, especially in areas that are already impaired. Advanced technologies for improving treatment and re-use need to be explored and implemented.

Next Steps

At this point in the development of the Action Agenda the proposed priorities are necessarily broad. But we are beginning to focus on the most important issues facing Puget Sound. As we define an Action Agenda at the ecosystem level, we need to see how the priorities will work with the local areas and refine implementation details. The science input into the Action Agenda will continue with the further analysis of status and threats, and development of measurable indicators for ecosystem health. We are making solid progress in creating a scientifically credible road map for the protection of Puget Sound.